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Guest opinion: Dress for Success is about more than just clothes

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Oregon's Workforce Development Strategic Plan 2012-2022 calls for "work ready" communities comprised of workers who possess "the skills and abilities" necessary to obtain and maintain employment. But the same report states that one in six Oregon adults do not have a high school diploma, specialized training, entrepreneurial skills or a full complement of "soft skills" that are necessary to help move Oregon forward. Oregon's business community needs partners who know how to help workers develop into valuable employees, especially those who are part of the "transitional" workforce (unemployed, dislocated, uneducated or on public assistance) and from underrepresented groups such as women and minorities.



Shari Dunn is executive director of Dress for Success Oregon.

Although known as a place to get clothing for job interviews, Dress for Success Oregon is, in fact, an organization committed to getting poor women's lives back on track. We have found that relationship-based programs, which stay with transitional workers from initial contact through employment, can have a profound impact on job retention and growth. In 2014 we served more than 1,500 women and more than 600 obtained employment.

How do we do it? It may sound clichéd, but we offer the women connection, self-confidence, soft skills, and hope. If you think about your best employees, you will undoubtedly find that those are core characteristics of the people you find most valuable.

Our programs are inclusive: Fast Track offers intensive, highly personalized job preparation, culminating in mock interviews conducted by local corporations, giving clients the opportunity to interface with local businesses. Once a woman gets a job, we provide two job retention programs. HOPE was developed when we discovered that many of our women were taking jobs but not keeping them. According to The Wynhurst Group, “22 percent of staff turnover occurs in the first 45 days of employment.” For businesses, “the cost of losing an employee in the first year is estimated to be at least three times salary.”

The three-month HOPE program, which maintains a 100 percent job retention rate, helps new employees navigate the choppy waters of the first days of employment. It teaches them how to relate to a supervisor, how to adapt to company culture, how to problem solve (critical thinking skills) — all highlighted as desperately needed skills by Oregon’s Workforce Development Strategic Plan for 2012-2022.

Our long-term job retention program, the Professional Women’s Group, works with women to develop financial management skills, life-work balance and the networking and advancement skills necessary to progress in their chosen careers and explore entrepreneurship. PWG maintains a 97 percent job retention rate. Women may also choose to be paired up with mentors who can help guide them as they advance and develop in their careers.

Dress for Success is all about connecting quality employees with quality employers. We have the employees. Now we need you.

